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Toward a better understanding of psychological symptoms in people confronted with the disappearance of a loved one:

A systematic review

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Background and aims

The disappearance of a loved one (an “ambiguous loss”) is claimed to be the most stressful type of loss (Boss, 2006). We aimed to explore the empirical evidence for this claim.

Objectives:

1. prevalence rates of psychological symptoms were summarized.
2. correlates of psychological symptoms were reviewed.
3. levels of psychopathology were compared between relatives of missing persons vs. deceased persons.

Relevance

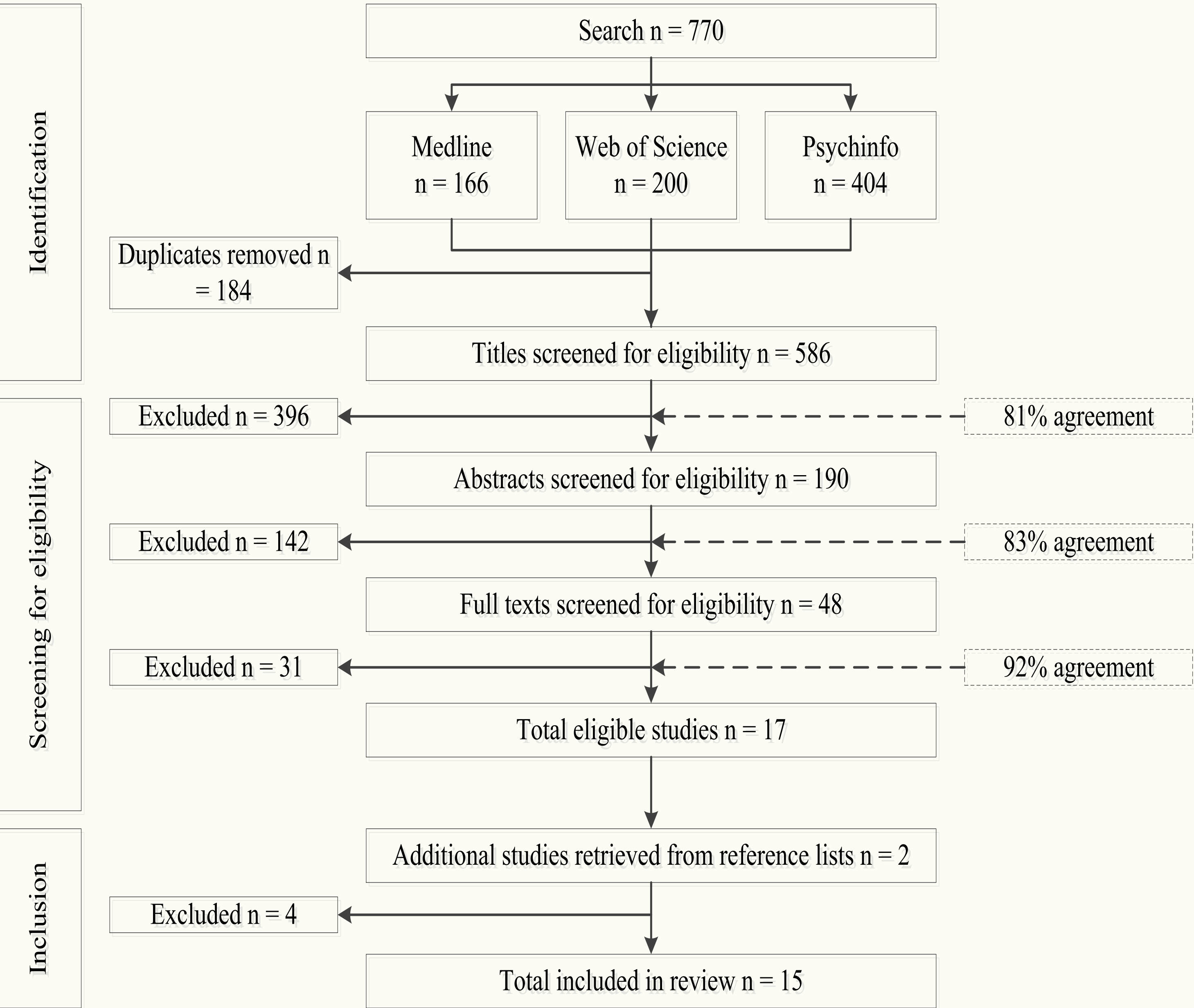
Given the large number of people who are confronted with the disappearance of loved one due to war and state terrorism this review may contribute to:

- Knowledge about the nature and severity of psychopathology in relatives of missing persons
- Identification of risk factors of psychopathology
- Directions for future research

Method

Inclusion criteria: (1) quantitative studies published in peer-reviewed journal or published dissertations abstract and (2) studies focusing on psychological symptoms in spouses, family members, and/or friend of missing persons.

Figure 1. Search strategy



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Results

All included studies used a cross-sectional design and were conducted in the context of war and state terrorism.

Prevalence rates: 1 to 67% for PTSD, 3 to 88% for depression, 1 to 65% for anxiety, 7 to 23% for complicated grief, and 43% for somatic complaints

Table 1. Prevalence rates of psychopathology.

Citation	Country of study	Sample description	Prevalence rates of psychopathology
Baraković et al., 2013	Bosnia Herzegovina	120 women with and 40 without a missing family member due to war 15-18 years earlier	88% current mild - severe depression; 65% current mild to severe anxiety symptoms
Baraković et al., 2014	Bosnia Herzegovina	See Baraković et al., (2013)	56% current PTSD
Heeke et al., 2015	Colombia	73 family members/friends of disappeared persons on average 13.4 years earlier and 222 family members/friends of killed persons on average 12.1 years earlier due to state terrorism	69% current depression; 67% current PTSD; 23% current complicated grief
Navia & Ossa, 2003	Colombia	46 family members of victims of economic extortive kidnapping for unknown duration and 113 whose relative was released for 2-15 months	39% current PTSD
Pérez-Sales et al., 2000	Chile	75 family members of enforced disappeared persons and 44 family members of persons killed in the context of state terrorism more than 20 years earlier	1%/5% current and lifetime anxiety disorders; 3%/17% current and lifetime depression; 7%/27% current and lifetime complicated grief; 1%/3% current and lifetime PTSD

Correlates of psychopathology: (1) being a spouse or parent of a missing person (vs. other relative), (2) being exposed to higher (vs. lower) number of traumatic events, and (3) having more (vs. less) hope that the missing loved is still alive. Associations between psychopathology and gender, age, time since disappearance, and education level were ambiguous.

Disappearance vs. death: Six studies compared psychopathology between relatives of missing persons (all in the context of terrorism/war) and homicidally bereaved persons. Overall groups **did not significantly differ** in severity or prevalence rate of psychopathology.

Discussion

Boss’ claim does not seem to be supported by our review. However, the small number and heterogeneity of the studies limits understanding of the experience of relatives of missing persons. This present review points at important gaps in the literature.

Avenues to pursue:

- Broadening the focus of research on consequences of disappearances beyond the context of war and state terrorism;
- employing more rigorous research methods (e.g., studying multiple potential correlates, use of validated measures and longitudinal designs).

Conclusions

We conclude (with caution) that (1) prevalence rates of psychopathology vary considerably among the studies; (2) spouses, parents, and people exposed to additional traumatic events are vulnerable for the development of psychological symptoms post-disappearance; and (3) the severity of symptoms does not significantly differ from homicidally bereaved individuals in the context of war and state terrorism.

References

Boss, P. (2006). *Loss, trauma, and resilience: Therapeutic work with ambiguous loss*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.